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Editorial

Rethinking Representation: Representative Claims in Global Perspective

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Abstract

The established notion of political representation is challenged on multiple accounts—theoretically, conceptually, and empirically. The contributions to this thematic issue explore the constructivist turn as the means for rethinking political representation today around the world. The articles included here seek to reconsider representation by theoretically and empirically reassessing how representation is conceptualized, claimed and performed—in Western and non-Western contexts. In recognition that democratic representation in Western countries is in a process of fundamental transformation and that non-Western countries no longer aim at replicating established Western models, we look for representation around the world—specifically in: Belgium, Brazil, France, Germany, China, and India. This enables us to advance the study of representative democracy from a global perspective. We show the limits and gaps in the constructivist literature and the benefits of theory-driven empirical research. Finally, we provide conceptual tools and frameworks for the (comparative) study of claims of representation.

Keywords

constructivist turn; democracy; representation; representative claim

Issue

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1. Introduction

Representation is at the core of the contemporary re-configuration of the political landscape. Increasingly new actors assert their place in the political arena and the established notion of political representation is challenged on multiple accounts—theoretically, conceptually and empirically:

- (1) Theoretically, since the 1990s, the constructivist turn critically assessed and rejected the underlying assumptions of the traditional ‘mandate model’ of representation. It brought to the fore symbolic and constitutive elements of political representation. The central tenants of the constructivist turn are the constitutive power of representation—political actors and identities are constituted in the

process of representation—and the understanding of representation as a performative process (Castiglione & Pollak, 2019; Disch, van de Sande, & Urbinati, 2019; Urbinati, 2006);

- (2) Conceptually, the Western-centric notion of elections as the core authorization mechanism in political representation is challenged on several accounts. Political action cannot be reduced to voting, and representation cannot be reduced to ‘acting in the name of the people’ (Sintomer, 2013; see also Manin, 1997). Constructivist scholars call for broadening of the notion of representation to include other (also non-Western) forms of representation; recasting the conceptualizations of the representative, the represented and the defining feature of the linkage between the two (cf. Guasti & Geissel, 2019; Montanaro, 2017);

- (3) Empirically, constructivist scholars do not limit the study of representation to the traditional arenas and actors—parliaments and political parties. Instead, they focus on the multitude of actors—both elective and non-elective—generating a cacophony of representative claims. (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008; Kuyper, 2016; Montanaro, 2012, 2017; Severs, 2010, 2012; Vieira, 2017).

The contributions to this thematic issue explore the constructivist turn as the means for rethinking political representation today around the world. The articles seek to conceptually refine representation by theoretically and empirically reassessing what representation is and what it does in Western and non-Western contexts. The point of departure for this thematic issue is the critical appraisal of the central concept of the constructivist turn—the representative claim. Following Saward (2010, 2014) and Disch (2015), we define representation as a process of making, accepting, or rejecting representative claims.

The articles in this thematic issue provide crucial conceptual and empirical insights about representation and its role in a global perspective. The authors focus on how different political actors (political parties, civil society) within different institutional settings (representative, participative and deliberative bodies), contexts (democratic, authoritarian), legacies, across countries, and levels of governance conceptualize and perform representation. We also show the limits of and gaps in the constructivist literature and the benefits of theory-driven empirical research. Finally, we provide conceptual tools and frameworks for the (comparative) study of claim-making.

This thematic issue seeks to capture and compare the (new) claims on representation. In recognition that non-Western countries no longer aim at replicating established Western models of (democratic) representation, but redefine it, we look for representation around the world—specifically in: Belgium, Brazil, France, Germany, China, and India. This enables us to advance the study of representative democracy from a global perspective by highlighting critical developments in the contemporary reconfiguration of the political landscape.

2. Overview of Contributions

In their contribution, Guasti and Geissel (2019) revisit Saward's concept of representative claims from an empirical perspective (cf. Saward, 2010). The contribution of this article is three-fold. First, Guasti and Geissel (2019) show that different types of claims exist alongside each other and require different authorization mechanisms. Most crucially, the standard claim of representation, including the explicit statement 'I represent,' is very rare in real life. Thus, to study (non-explicit) representative claims Guasti and Geissel define (claimed) constituency and (claimed) linkage as essential features of representative claims. Using these two features, they distinguish

four types of claims. Second, Guasti and Geissel (2019) provide a framework for examining the mechanisms of acceptance for the different claim types. Third, the authors apply both frameworks to a real-life case of representation of non-citizens on a municipal level. Their in-depth qualitative analysis of claim-making, acceptance, and rejection showcases the potential of systemizing current claims on representation and provides new insights into mechanisms of acceptance and rejection.

Based on their comparative study of participatory budgeting in Chengdu (China) and Delhi (India), Frenkiel and Tawa Lama-Rewal (2019) propose a redistributive relationship that challenges two existing relationships between representation and participation. The article demonstrates the transformative role of participatory budgeting, which through participation constitutes new representative roles. The comparison of participatory budgeting processes in Chengdu (China) and Delhi (India) underscores both their potentials and pitfalls. Participatory budgeting can transform political representation and redistribute power, but it can also be used to strengthen existing hierarchies. The authors see participatory budgeting as an arena, where political representation is redefined, the legitimacy of traditional representatives is challenged, and new representative claims emerge.

By investigating gender quota debates in India and France Dutoya and Sintomer (2019) generate novel insights into the nature of representation. Analyzing discourses and frames on women's representation in Western and non-Western contexts, they highlight both the transversal and country-specific conceptions of political representation of (gender) difference. In France, the proponents of gender quotas succeeded in reframing republican universalism in the 'parity' discourse by successfully reconciling essentialist, transcendental, and constructivist arguments on women's representation (Dutoya & Sintomer, 2019). In India, extending the concept of group representation to women proved divisive and met with strong resistance. The core of the Indian resistance to women's representation was the category of 'gender.' Unlike widely accepted and increasingly salient categories like caste or religion, proponents of women's representation in India were unable to resolve the internal challenge between the dualist nature of gender, which, as a crosscutting political category, is both universalistic and particularistic.

In their analysis of the parliamentary debates on the women's quota in German supervisory boards between 2013 and 2017, Joschko and Glaser (2019) take a different look at a similar issue. Using advanced methods of multiple correspondence analysis, natural language processing techniques, sentiment analysis, and logistic regression, Joschko and Glaser (2019) generate valuable insights on claims, their justification, and assessment (acceptance or rejection by the constituency). The starting point of their analysis was uncovering distinctive clusters of claim-making regarding women's representation

in parliamentary debates. Subsequently, social media analysis of contemporaneous Twitter debates allowed Joschko and Glaser to analyze similarities and differences in claim-making and the interaction between the members of parliament and Twitter users. Beyond sophisticated empirical analyses, the combination of methods enabled Joschko and Glaser (2019) to identify gaps in Saward's approach and to ask conceptually highly relevant questions. They argue that without an underlining agreement based on a societal consensus, the audience cannot be the ultimate judge of claims (Joschko & Glaser, 2019). Two critical questions ought to be answered to resolve the dilemma of non-electoral authorization of claims. First, under what conditions can a claim be accepted—what are (alternative) forms of authorization. Second, who defines the constituency, which is to perform this authorization and on what grounds.

In their article, Guasti and de Almeida (2019) identify another gap in Saward's approach—the lack of differentiation between (claims of) representation and misrepresentation. Guasti and de Almeida (2019) argue that as a multitude of (new) claim makers contest the authority of elected representatives as well as the functioning of the existing system of representative democracy by alleging misrepresentation, a distinction ought to be made between claims of representation and claims of misrepresentation. Claims of misrepresentation strategically employ persuasion and performance—presenting critiques of policies, politics, and polity, in order to demand changes, and (in some cases) highlight the broken linkage between elected representatives and the people, and potentially to establish themselves as the new representatives. Guasti and de Almeida (2019) compare claims of misrepresentation in Brazil made by civil society groups (before and during the presidential impeachment between 2014 and 2016) and in Germany (focusing on the parliamentarians of the Alternative for Germany in 2017). In both countries, claim makers present new demands, but also challenge existing policies, politics, and polity. Yet, the different actors and political contexts generate different emphases. In Germany, the primary focus of misrepresentation is policies, whereas in Brazil it is politics. In both cases, there is a strong appeal to the political crisis to convince the audience, but different ways to address the problems of misrepresentation.

Misrepresentation is also the key focus of the article by Knops and De Cleen (2019), who analyze criticism of the (mainstream) media by the Flemish radical right movement Schild & Vrienden (S&V). Knops and De Cleen (2019) show that the critique of the media is key to the constitution of the S&V movement's identity. It allows the S&V to clearly define the core populist Manichean distinction between the pure 'we'—those excluded from or 'silenced by' the mainstream media—, and the corrupt 'them'—mainstream politicians and issues covered by the media. In contrast to the 'lying' mainstream press, the S&V internal media are presented not only as a tool for the S&V to 'speak the truth' but as an instrument

of representation of the 'silenced majority.' Without its opponents—the mainstream media and mainstream political actors—S&V cannot define itself and assert its political authority. As for other populist insurgents, a claim of misrepresentation is a necessary precursor to claim of representation.

Tawa Lama-Rewal (2019) focuses on the interplay between populism and representation for a successful populist insurgent in India—the Party of the Common Man. The author asks how the discourses and practices of a successful populist movement change once it reaches power. Tawa Lama-Rewal's (2019) article offers an intriguing answer: While misrepresentation and participatory radicalism—the juxtaposition of participation and representation—are vital to the insurgent discourse, once the populists are in power, they attempt and can partially succeed in reconciling representation and participation in their practices. Thus, in specific political contexts rather than endanger representative democracy, populist actors can reinvigorate it.

Also concentrating on India, Chowdhury (2019) focuses on the establishment and evolution of the India against Corruption movement (IAC). Chowdhury (2019) shows how mobilization against corruption and the Manichean distinction of the corrupt elite and 'pure' people enabled the IAC movement to appeal to the Indian middle class. The IAC movement juxtaposed representative democracy with people's democracy. The earlier was portrayed as inauthentic, distant, and tainted by corruption. The latter offered as a new, authentic way of representing the people and civil society—by unmediated direct action. Similarly, to Knops and De Cleen (2019), Chowdhury (2019) highlights the importance of the media as an arena of political contestation. Unlike in the Flemish press, Indian (mainstream) media were instrumental in the rise of the IAC by legitimizing the contestation of representative democracy. Chowdhury's article illustrates how: (1) A new Hindu nationalist identity emerged in the claims-making process; (2) contestation is an essential strategy of aspiring populists; and (3) studying representative claims and the process of claims-making over time provides inferences about the transformation of the political landscape.

In his article, Duan (2019) focuses on the transition from 'vanguard' to 'representation' in contemporary Chinese discourse on political representation. Over time, representation in China evolved from the ancient authoritarian representation in the 'Heaven-Ruler-People'; through the 'vanguard' representation in the Cultural Revolution-era; to the 'representative of the people' in the last two decades under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (Duan, 2019). Today, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) no longer considers itself as the facilitator of the proletarian revolution, but as the authoritarian representative. By embodying the nation, the CCP tries to bridge inequalities and act as an arbiter in the resolution of societal conflicts. The constructivist approach enables Duan to overcome the distinction between demo-

cratic representation and representation in the authoritarian context (Duan, 2019). His focus is the evolution of the relationship between the party (CCP) and the people. It also enables him to pose a crucial question: If representation can exist in non-Western non-democratic context, what is the relationship between representation and democracy, and to what extent is the distance between the representative and the represented a necessary and constitutive element of democratic politics (cf. Ankersmit, 2002).

In another look on representation in China, Frenkiel and Shpakovskaya (2019) trace the evolution of the representative claim by the CCP over the last 70 years. The authors find both continuity and change: continuity in the preservation of the hegemony of the CCP over emerging (online) claim-makers; change in the ability of the CCP to transform and adjust its representative claim to fit the rapid socio-economic changes in the country. Frenkiel and Shpakovskaya (2019) show that CCP successfully shifted from the Leninist and Marxist ideals of representation of workers and peasants in the continuous class struggle to positioning itself as the representative of the interests of the Chinese people and the future of the nation. Over time, strategies and emphasis on different aspects of representation changed, and representation shifted from political-legal to symbolic and allegedly substantive. This article illustrates that in the Chinese official discourse, the CCP remains the sole representative, but its constituency evolved (Frenkiel & Shpakovskaya, 2019). Furthermore, the notion of representation gained importance over time, and so did the portrayal of the CCP as a performance-driven and responsive representative.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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